ICPR SERIES ON VALUE-ORIENTED EDUCATION

Parvati's Tapasya

General Editor
KIREET JOSHI

Parvati's Tapasya

••स्कैन्ड/Scanned••

Illumination, Heroism and Harmony

Parvati's Tapasya

General Editor: KIREET JOSHI

294.52114
J75P

Illumination, Heroism and Harmony

Preface

The task of preparing teaching-learning material for value-oriented education is enormous.

There is, first, the idea that value-oriented education should be exploratory rather than prescriptive, and that the teaching-learning material should provide to the learners a growing experience of exploration.

Secondly, it is rightly contended that the proper inspiration to turn to value-orientation is provided by biographies, autobiographical accounts, personal anecdotes, epistles, short poems, stories of humour, stories of human interest, brief passages filled with pregnant meanings, reflective short essays written in well-chiselled language, plays, powerful accounts of historical events, statements of personal experiences of values in actual situations of life, and similar other statements of scientific, philosophical, artistic and literary expression.

Thirdly, we may take into account the contemporary fact that the entire world is moving rapidly towards the synthesis of the East and the West, and in that context, it seems obvious that our teaching-learning material should foster the gradual familiarisation of students with global themes of universal significance as also those that underline the importance of diversity in unity. This implies that the material should bring the students nearer to their cultural heritage, but also to the highest that is available in the cultural experiences of the world at large.

Fourthly, an attempt should be made to select from Indian and world history such examples that could illustrate the theme of the upward progress of humankind. The selected research material could be multi-sided, and it should be presented in such a way that teachers can make use of it in the manner and in the context that they need in specific situations that might obtain or that can be created in respect of the students.

The research team at the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) has attempted the creation of the relevant teaching-learning material, and they have decided to present the same in the form of monographs. The total number of these monographs will be around eighty to eighty-five.

It appears that there are three major powers that uplift life to higher and higher normative levels, and the value of these powers, if well illustrated, could be effectively conveyed to the learners for their upliftment. These powers are those of illumination, heroism and harmony.

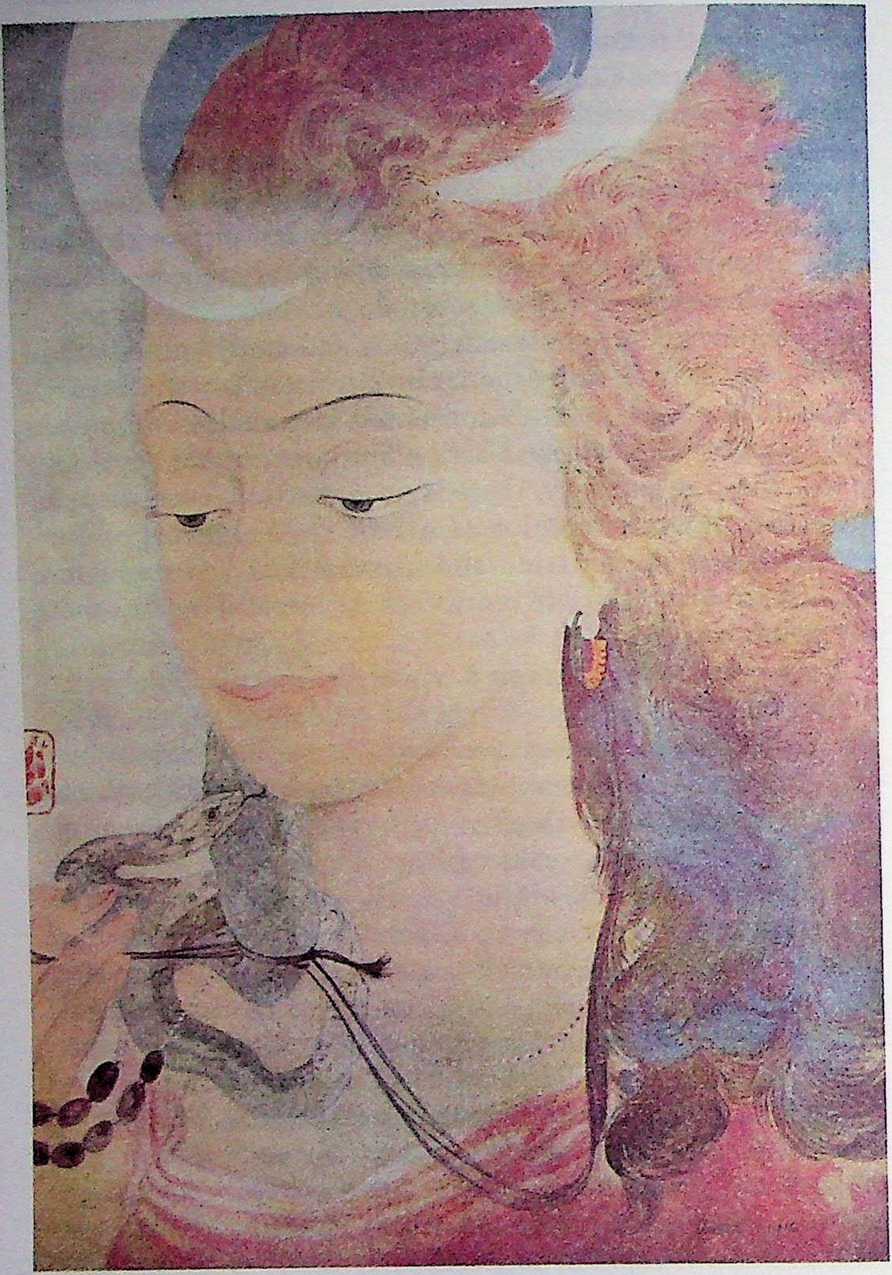
It may be useful to explore the meanings of these terms — illumination, heroism and harmony — since the aim of these monographs is to provide material for a study of what is sought to be conveyed through these three terms. We offer here exploratory statements in regard to these three terms.

Illumination is that ignition of inner light in which meaning and value of substance and life-movement are seized, understood, comprehended, held, and possessed, stimulating and inspiring guided action and application and creativity culminating in joy, delight, even ecstasy. The width, depth and height of the light and vision determine the degrees of illumination, and when they reach the splendour and glory of synthesis and harmony, illumination ripens into wisdom. Wisdom, too, has varying degrees that can uncover powers of knowledge and action, which reveal unsuspected secrets and unimagined skills of art and craft of creativity and effectiveness.

Heroism is, essentially, inspired force and self-giving and sacrifice in the operations of will that is applied to the quest, realisation and triumph of meaning and value against the resistance of limitations and obstacles by means of courage, battle and adventure. There are degrees and heights of heroism determined by the intensity, persistence and vastness of sacrifice. Heroism attains the highest states of greatness and refinement when it is guided by the highest wisdom and inspired by the sense of service to the ends of justice and harmony, as well as when tasks are executed with consummate skill.

Harmony is a progressive state and action of synthesis and equilibrium generated by the creative force of joy and beauty and delight that combines and unites knowledge and peace and stability with will and action and growth and development. Without harmony, there is no perfection, even though there could be maximisation of one or more elements of our nature. When illumination and heroism join and engender relations of mutuality and unity, each is perfected by the other and creativity is endless.

This present monograph is entitled *Parvati's Tapasya*. It presents an episode of the life of the goddess as recounted by Kalidasa in his epic *Kumarasambhava*. The great poet describes one of the greatest instruments used by ancient Indian seekers in their quest, the method of *tapasya*, here undertaken by Parvati herself for the sake of love. Tapasya can be said to include three stages. Firstly, one clearly sees and comprehends that a sacrifice is necessary to achieve one's object. Secondly, one determines to give oneself in sacrifice: integral self-giving, concentration of the will, and gathering of all the different parts of the being around one's purpose are included in this stage. When this is achieved, the desired object is finally attained and the *tapaswin* or *tapaswini* experiences a feeling of renewed energy, inner fulfilment and harmony. He or she plunges into great depths of joy and ecstasy. This monograph is aimed at presenting this key-element in ancient Indian culture, and how it could be seen and described through the eyes of a great artist.



Uma - Abanindranath Tagore

Parvati's Tapasya

Introduction

Her aim was nothing less than to win the heart of the supreme ascetic, silent and motionless in his abode of ice and snow. The great Shiva clothed in ashes, whom neither desire nor grief can touch, whose meditation is like Infinity contemplating Infinity, by whom worlds are created and worlds are destroyed, who can immobilise the raging Ganges streams in his matted locks and bear in his throat the fire of the primordial poison, on that god, Parvati, the lovely daughter of Himalaya, had set her eyes. This was not for the first time. She had been his from the beginning of time, in other lives, under other names. But in this birth as daughter of the Rocs, Shaila-ja, she once again had to seek Him and awaken his love and be recognised by Him as a part of Himself.

She had grown up on the slopes of the Himalaya; she had heard the music of the wind blowing in the hollow bamboos like a heavenly voice; as a child she had played on the sandy banks of the Ganges and wandered freely in the fragrant cedar woods. She was filled with the wonders and delight and vivaciousness of Nature. As for Him, somewhere on a high peak lost in whiteness, seated on a tiger's skin, He was immersed in trance, eyes closed. The dark mass of his matted hair rose upward and in the strange moonlight that streamed from his brow, one could distinguish the gleaming of a snake, that tied up the hair like a thread. She was beautiful as a lotus blooming under the sun, her gait was as graceful as if swans had been her dance masters. She had approached

Him and placed flowers at His feet — but He had not paid any attention. Beauty did not move Him. And neither did passion: Kama, the god of Desire, whose arrows succeed even where Indra's lightning bolt fails, had made Spring appear miraculously in this inhuman solitude; he had made trees suddenly blossom and birds sing; under his influence the elephant-cow drew closer to her bull and lovingly offered him a mouthful of water; the antelope approaching his doe fondly scratched her with his horn while she closed her eyes in pleasure; even the old sages of the mountain were hardly able to prevent sensuous images from entering their minds; but when Kama had been ready to shoot his arrow of mango-buds at Shiva's heart, a blazing fire had flown out of the third eye of the great God, angry to be disturbed in his meditation. Only ashes were left where the god of Desire had stood. Not by desire indeed was Shiva's love to be won.

Then Parvati understood that she had to go beyond beauty, beyond desire, beyond love. She had to throw at His feet something more. The thing that she willed so passionately, union with Shiva, she had to will it even more; she had to make every part of her being, all recesses of her body, heart and mind will it even more intensely; she had to concentrate all her will, gather all her energies and capacities and focus them on this sole purpose. All other preoccupations had to be discarded. For His sake she must be ready to ignore social conventions and brave the reprobation of the world. Her body had to forget all needs or enjoyments, her mind reject all thoughts, her heart abandon all attachments. Only the need for Shiva, the thought of Shiva, the love for Shiva should exist. In a bold effort she must refuse to be anything else than an intense flame burning only for Shiva.

Thus for the love of Shiva, the Lord of Tapas, did Parvati resolve to undertake a great tapasya. The word tapasya so significantly derived from the root tap, to heat, is sometimes wrongly translated as "penance". But as Sri Aurobindo says, it implies "a fierce and strong effort of all the human powers towards any given end", the end being, in this case, Shiva's love. Tapasya means a tremendous concentration of the will "which sets the *whole being in a flame, masses all the faculties in close ranks and hurls them furiously on a single objective." It is true that ancient Indians thought that this could be done most effectively by making the mind the master of the body and, in the course of time, the word came to be confined to the sense of ascetic practices having this object. It is also true that given the tendency of the ancient Indian mind to follow each pursuit of life to its farthest point and to sound its utmost possibilities, many were those who in later days sought the Eternal through extreme physical austerities (such as the dwelling between five fires), but one should not lose sight of the original meaning of tapasya, which was "concentration of the will", — a concentration so intense that it produced heat — heat, that is to say energy, force.*

To awaken Shiva from his trance, all the beauty of this world, the need and aspiration of this earth took the form of a woman. Parvati is Nature, Prakriti, and from her union with the Eternal Purusha, a being will be born who will defeat evil. She is the soul of us all searching for God. She is destined to meet Him and unite with Him. Yet, for attaining Him, whom Kama's weapon could not touch, in a fierce effort she has herself to become the bow, stretched to the extreme, and the arrow, solely pointed at Him. Although she is the great goddess, in order to take her right place on Shiva's lap she has to give up entirely what she was. What a paradox that for conquering the supreme Soul the divine Mother must throw herself into the fire of sacrifice! Even for her, there was a price to pay, as it were. Thus this "supreme fable" conceals a great lesson in human life and demonstrates the nature of action. One is reminded of the Gita, in which it is stated that all action involves a tapasya, all action involves a giving of what we are, and all action supposes a sacrifice. These are the three elements inherent in all works. They are inevitable, though they may be undertaken more or less voluntarily, more or less actively, more or less consciously. So the story of Parvati seeking after Shiva (symbolic at more than one level) is an image of man's condition in the world. Striving to realise our own perfection, we have no other choice than to move, to act — and tapasya, giving *and sacrifice, are the means of our action.*

Parvati's tapasya and its achievement are described by Kalidasa in the fifth canto of his great epic poem Kumarasambhava, *the Birth of the War God, which many critics regard as his crowning work. Indeed what "the most splendidly sensuous of poets" describes in great detail and with an obvious delight is the contrast between Parvati's delicate, young and graceful body, and the rigour of practices that one usually associates with the hardened body of hermits. Here was a scene that contained too many potential marvels to be ignored by a poet of love and beauty and the joy of life. The greatness of ascetic mastery had been depicted many times before in Indian epics, but it had never been made a part of the beauty of life, while Kalidasa's appreciation is aesthetic in its nature. The picture of Parvati, immobile, standing in water during the nights of the cold season while the winds blew sheets of sleet and a pair of birds cried out for each other, is but one of the vivid, brilliant and richly coloured series of images that is offered to us in a magnificent succession of stanzas. The softness of Parvati's body immersed in icy water, the harshness of the wind, the frightening sound of the storm, the plaintive moan of the birds, all those notations speak forcefully to the reader's imagination and add sensuous pleasure to his admiration for Parvati's heroism.*

Kumarsambhava is classified by sanskritists as a Mahakavya, or Great Poem. According to poetic rules, the main characters of a Mahakavya must be gods, heroes or persons of royal descent. And it is true that the subject of the poem is the union of the supreme god and the supreme goddess. But Kalidasa excels in the blending of divine loftiness with the sweetness of very human feelings. As Sri Aurobindo said, "Under his slight touch,... the sublime yields to the law of romance." All the gods described in the poem, and particularly the two lovers, are at the same time cosmic beings and earthly creatures whose speech, thought and passion are human. All their traditional and mythic attributes are present but transformed by the poet into romantic elements that are part of the charm and power of their personality. We could *give as an example a passage of the second canto in which Kalidasa depicts the gods complaining to Brahma about the atrocities committed by the demon Taraka. These deities have been terribly harassed and humiliated by the Asura; they feel totally helpless and there they stand, in front of Brahma, crest-fallen and resembling faded flowers: Varuna's noose droops in his hand, Yama aimlessly scrapes the ground with his rod as if with a wooden stick, Indra's thunderbolt has its edges blunted and the Rudras hang their head from where the crescent moons dangle. The attributes that one associates usually with divine powers, here are part of a description of a psychological state and therefore are brought onto our own plane of experience (the fact that these attributes are so well-known adds a delightful touch of subtle humour to the scene). These heavenly creatures could almost be our brothers — but brothers belonging to a more refined, more beautiful, more conscious, more harmonious world than ours, a world in which even sadness is charming. Himalaya is successively and sometimes simultaneously described as mountain range and living god. Similarly in Parvati the human and divine features blend with an astounding ease. The great being that she is, who moves from life to life, and who can perceive Shiva's greatness because she too lives on those heights, has also all the fragility of a young girl protected from the coarseness of the world by the tender care of loving parents. When she resolves to undertake tapasya, (so frightening a decision that her mother is said to have exclamed* U Ma! *"Don't!" — a cry supposedly at the origin of Parvati's other name Uma), she does it with a fierce determination, but this austere discipline does not make her lose any of her charm; on the contrary her tapasya enhances the beauty of her frail body like some strange and unique ornament. The divine Parvati appears to us with all the shyness of a maiden in love; she blushes when questioned about the object of her love and almost faints with emotion when suddenly faced with her lover. These are touching details because one recognizes in these movements simple things of life, that have kept their simplicity but that are permeated with and transmuted by beauty.*

And this leads us to another observation on Kalidasa's universe: it is a paradise of beautiful things. A paradise that belongs neither to this world, nor to the other: all the gods, men and animals, mountains and vales, trees and creepers which live there are Kalidasa's creatures. To all of them Kalidasa lends elegance, kindness, sweetness. In this world of innocence, everything is purified by beauty. Even the lion's claws stained with the blood of the elephant are graceful. Even the rocs and the clouds are sentient and friendly beings. Even grief loses its bitter taste and becomes an ecstasy that is delicious to our heart. In fact, the beauty and the joy of life concealed in all objects are now revealed to our enchanted eyes and their appeal is so strong that thereafter it influences our own vision; we, too, start to see our world in a subtly different way; our eyes and all our senses have learnt to seek for the underlying delight in human life; we have begun to experience a different kind of a thirst; what we are now looking for is the soul hidden in matter. This is what the poet taught us to seek. "After reading a poem of his", says Sri Aurobindo, "the world and life and our fellow creatures human, animal or inanimate have become suddenly more beautiful and dear to us than there were before... Our own common thoughts, feelings, and passions have also become suddenly fair to us, they have received the sanction of beauty." Thus, "by a singular paradox", we reach God not through the spirit or reason, but "through the senses."

The central theme itself of the poem is a symbol of this kind of spiritual search. For Parvati's love is a very sensuous passion, but the very fact that it has for object the Eternal Being makes it into a seeking for the divine; it gives it a strange charm which partakes of the body and of the spirit. Shiva's well-known marks, such as his blue throat, his moon-crescent, his third eye, which are part of a symbolic language and normally pertain to mythological stories or religious discourse, here are evoked by Parvati as things of physical beauty for which she pines, which she desires to see, to touch, to caress. She seeks for the Spirit, not as an object of worship, but as her lover by whom she wants to be embraced. One is not very far here from the subsequent development in Indian *religion when the relation between the human soul and the Supreme will be seen and experienced as the love of a woman for her lover. In these religions of bhakti, the emotional being of man, illumined and uplifted by the love for a representation of the divine, will participate and even be the main lever in the spiritual quest. So one can measure how much Kalidasa's works must have prepared the Indian temperament for this new step in the exploration of a more and more complete spirituality. As Sri Aurobindo says, "One can see how powerfully Kalidasa's poetry must have prepared the national mind for the religion of the Puranas, for the worship of Kali, our Mother and of Sri Krishna of Vrindavan, our soul's Paramour."*

Although Kumarsambhava *contains seventeen sargas or cantos, it is admitted by most critics that only the first eight cantos are from Kalidasa's hand. The poet opens the first sarga with a description of the Himalaya, "a god concealed in mountain majesty", recounts his union with Mena, "that mind-born child of the world-fathers" and the birth of their daughter, Parvati. We are told that Shiva has renounced marriage after the death of his first wife, Sati, but that Sati has been reborn as Parvati, to whom sciences and wisdoms came back "out of the former life, like swans that haste in autumn to a sacred river's shores". She grows up and Kalidasa describes the blossoming of Parvati's perfect body, beautiful curve after beautiful curve, like a painting unfolding under the brush of a great master. Then we discover the peak where Shiva meditates, "desireless in the blind desire of things". The scenery changes in the second canto and the reader is transported to Brahma's abode: all the gods have gathered there. They are harassed by the demon Taraka, and they complain that they are powerless against this great evil being; Brahma reveals that only a son born from Shiva and Parvati (Kumara, also known as Skanda or Kartikeya) will lead the armies of the gods to victory against Taraka. In order to awaken passion in the great anchorite, Indra asks Kama to launch his flower-arrows against Shiva's concentration. Kama accompanied by his wife, Rati, and followed by his friend, Spring, appear in Shiva's meditation* *grove. That desolate place is suddenly transformed by the Spring into a paradise of beauty and love. Parvati approaches the great god and "bends her head so low that the flower shining in the darkness of her hair slides down". Kama is all set to discharge his arrow when Shiva discovers him. Angry to be disturbed, the great god burns him to ashes with flames shooting out of his third eye. The canto ends with the great Himalaya removing in haste his daughter from the scene "like the elephant of the gods holding a lotus sticking to his tusk". The fourth canto is devoted to the lamentation of Rati, Kama's wife. The gods promise Rati that Kama will regain his body once Shiva and Parvati are joined in marriage. Then in the fifth canto, presented here, the spotlight is again on Parvati, her tapasya and her success. The following two cantos describe the preparations for the marriage and the ceremony, and the poem as we have it concludes in the last canto with a magnificent description of the divine couple enjoying the pleasures of marriage on the summits of the world while the sun sets below them in a grandiose symphony.*

Let us turn now to the central event of the epic, the decision of Parvati to undertake tapas.

Parvati's Tapasya

A blazing fire sprung from Shiva's third eye, had consumed Cupid,[1] the mind-born god, and reduced him to ashes in front of Parvati, thereby shattering her hopes. Then the daughter of the Mountain[2] blamed her own beauty in her heart. For what use is beauty if it does not attract the beloved?

She decided to take recourse to austerities and mind-centered meditation in order to make her beauty bear fruit; for how else could she secure such love and such a husband?

Mena, hearing that her daughter, who had set her heart on Shiva, was resolved to practise asceticism, clasped her to her bosom and spoke, trying to dissuade her from the terrible vow of hermits:

"There are other lovable gods that don't dwell in wild woods or desolate mountains. O my child, how alien is this austerity from this body of thine! The delicate Shirisha flower[3] may bear the tread of the bee, but not of the bird."

Though she urged her, yet Mena could not rein in her daughter's fixed purpose from action. For can a mind, steadfastedly resolved on the object of its desire, be turned back

---

1. See glossary at the end of the text.

any more than a stream can be stopped from rushing towards low ground?

Wisely, Parvati waited till her father knew of her resolve. Then at the right moment, she approached him through a friend and requested permission to dwell in the forest for practising austerity and meditation till she obtained the fruit of her desire.

Her father, pleased with this passion so worthy of her, gave his permission. Then Gauri, the fair lady, went to a peacock-haunted peak, which later on would become famous among the people by her name.

In her irremovable resolve, she had cast aside her necklace whose restless string would rub off the sandal paste smeared on her skin, and she now wore a bark tawny-red[4] like the young dawn, though her high swelling breasts always tended to prevent its close fitting.

Her face had been lovely with its fair adorned tresses, but now it was equally so with the ascetic's matted hair. A lotus not only looks beautiful when covered with bees, but also when coated with moss.

In accordance with her vow, she had fastened a triple plaited girdle of rough grass and, as it was the first time she wore it, her skin was constantly irritated and her waist became all red.

Her hand no longer was busy colouring her lips; she had put that away from her; neither did it play with the ball all reddened with the vermilion[5] of her breasts; for both the vermilion was banished from her breasts and the ball from her hand; now she made this hand, pricked while plucking the Kusha grass,[6] a constant companion of the rosary.[7]

She, who would be tormented by the flowers fallen from her hair while turning on her luxurious couch, now lay with her fair soft arm for pillow, reclining on the bare altar-ground.

Faithful to her vow, she had abandoned her amorous movements and her vivacious glances, entrusting the slender creepers with the former and the female deer with the latter, as if these were a deposit that she would take back later.

Untiringly she looked after the saplings,[8] watering them with pitchers round like breasts. She loved those young trees as if she were their mother, and even the son she would beget later, Kartikeya,[9] would never dislodge this affection.

She fed the fawns of the forest with handfuls of wild grain. The little animals trusted her so much that they let themselves be fondled by her, and it was wonderful to watch their eyes so close to her eyes.

Old sages heard of this young girl dressed in bark who performed the ritual ablutions, offered sacrifices to the fire and recited sacred texts, and they came there eager to see for themselves this extraordinary phenomenon: indeed age is not important in the case of those who have set their eyes on the highest goal.

Parvati's austerities purified the grove and transformed it into a holy sanctuary: sacrificial fires burnt in newly-built huts of leaves, the long-standing hostility between warring beasts had disappeared, and the trees honoured all guests by providing them with the fruits they liked.

But when she realised that what she desired was not to be attained by the austerities and meditation she had been practising so far, then, disregarding the delicateness of her body, she embarked upon a path of extreme asceticism.

She, who would feel tired after playing with a ball, plunged into a life of amazingly rigorous practices. Indeed her body seemed made of gold lotuses, being at the same time delicate like a flower and tough like a hard metal.

In summer the lady of slender waist, smiling so very innocently, stood in the middle of four blazing fires, eyes wide open, fixing her gaze on the heavenly ball of fire above her head and refusing to be overpowered by its blinding light.

First, her face, greatly scorched by the rays of the sun, shone like a pink lotus. But gradually, and only around the long corners of her eyes, the skin slowly darkened.

A tree does not ask for water; it simply absorbs whatever it receives. Similarly Parvati would live only on that water — dew or rain — that would come to her of its own accord, and on the moon beams dripping with nectar.

Encircled by the four roaring fires and exposed to the fierce rays of the sun, she let herself be completely burnt, and when the showers of the late summer arrived, an intense heat came out of her, as out of a parched earth, and ascended upwards.

The first drops of water remained suspended for a while on her long eye-lashes; then after falling on her lips which they bruised, they broke against the top of her firm breasts. Finally, rolling through the delicate lines of her bust, they reached her deep-chiselled navel.

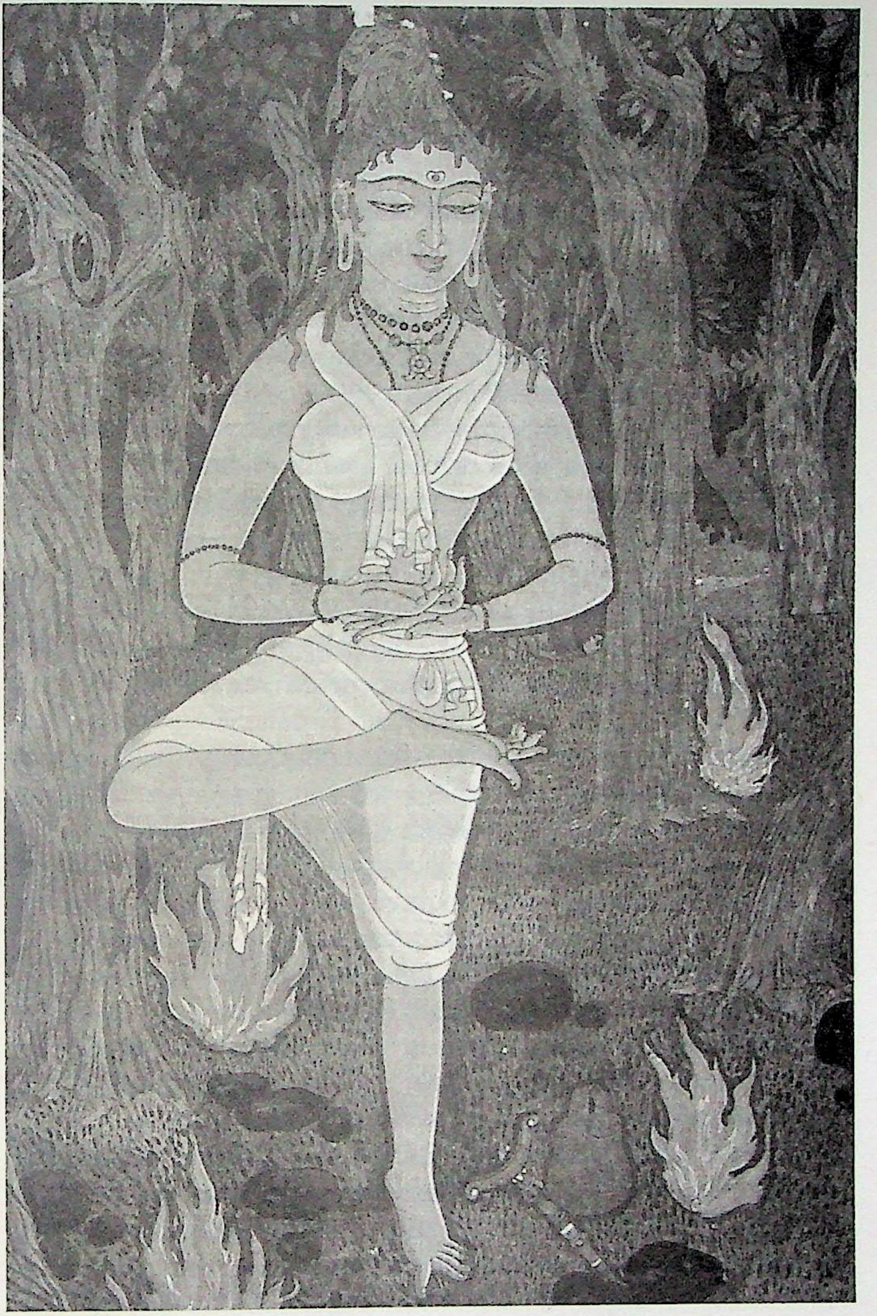
She stood there, unprotected in the middle of raging tempests, drenched by incessant rains or lashed by the winds, and all she had to rest on was a bare rock. Flashes of lightning, the eyes of the night, at times pierced the darkness and through them the nights bore witness to her extraordinary sacrifice.

Winter came. The cold winds blew and scattered around masses of hardened snow. Unflinchingly she stood in water like a pillar of strength. Yet at night when she heard the plaintive cry of the two chakravaka birds[10] calling each other, she felt the pain of their separation and her soft heart filled with compassion for the two estranged lovers.

The snows had robbed the streams of their beautiful lotuses. But her face, as fragrant as the lotus itself, was reflected at night in the icy waters: shining brightly with the quivering petal of the lower lip, it restored its lost splendour to the streams of the mountain.

It had always been thought that the highest achievement in asceticism was to subsist only on leaves that fall naturally from the trees; but even that she spurned. The leaves remained on the ground. Hence, the name "Aparna", which those who know history gave to this gently-speaking lady: A-parna, that is to say, "the one who refuses even leaves".

Though her body was as delicate as the stem of the lotus, she submitted it to all these exhausting ordeals day after day and



night after night, thereby going much further than anchorites[11] with hardened frames.

One day, an ascetic with matted hair, wearing an antelope skin, a staff in his hand, appeared in the sanctuary. He was glowing as it were with an inner light and there was a great confidence in the way he spoke. He seemed the very embodiment of the burning quest for true knowledge.

Always hospitable to guests, Parvati welcomed him with great respect. Those like her, whose mind is centered, are full of reverence towards exceptional beings, even if there happens to be equality between them.

The stranger accepted the hospitality offered according to tradition and pretended to rest for a while. Then looking innocently at Uma and without deviating from the usual norms of politeness, he asked her:

"Do you easily get wood and grass for your rites? Is the water suitable for your ablutions?[12] And do you practise austerities proportionate to your strength? Indeed a sound body is an indispensable instrument for the pursuit of the ideal law of life.

"You must have watered these creepers yourself as I can see young leaves sprouting on them; are they growing well? These buds resemble your lips, which have not been painted for a long time and yet look so pink...

"The little fawns seem to love you greatly as they come and eat grass in your hands; are you happy with them? O, lotus-eyed one, their sparkling glances look so very much like yours...

"O Daughter of the Mountain, how true is the saying that beauty never leads to sin, since, noble lady, your conduct has become an example even for ascetics.

"The laughing waters of Ganga falling from heaven and resplendent with the offering of flowers scattered by the Seven Rishis[13] do not sanctify your father, the Upholder of the Earth, as much as you do by the purity of your life.

"O chaste lady, it seems to me that out of the three goals of life — wealth, enjoyment and search for the highest law of life — the latter is the best, as it is the one you pursue without any thought for the other two.

"Although you received me with special marks of respect, you should not consider me as a stranger, O beautiful lady : it is said that those good people who have walked together seven steps are declared friends.

"It is why, O thou rich with ascetic force, I am eager to ask you something. Pray forgive me, I am curious like all seekers of knowledge. If it is not a secret, do answer me.

"You were born in the family of Brahma, the first creator; in your body has arisen the combined beauty of the three worlds, as it were; you do not need to search for wealth and the happiness it gives; you are in the prime of your youth. What else, tell me, could you be asking for as a reward of your asceticism?

"Strong-willed ladies faced with an unbearable slight may take recourse to this path. But, O slender damsel, search as I may, I don't see that anything of the kind has happened to you.

"O lady of perfect brows, your beauty cannot possibly experience the pain of humiliation. And how could you be insulted in your father's house? Nor could any stranger be disrespectful to you. For who would stretch his hand to seize the jewel set on the snake's head ?

"Why have you abandoned all ornaments? How is it that, so young, you put on a bark-garment fit for old people? Tell me, does the night, resplendent with the moon and stars, already in the evening aspire for dawn?

"If you seek heaven, then your efforts are unnecessary: isn't the kingdom of your father the land of the gods? And if you wish for a husband, then cease your austerities: a jewel itself does not have to seek, it is sought after.

"Well, your sighs have answered my question! Yet I am perplexed. I don't see anyone worthy of being desired by you. So how could you not obtain the one you desire?

"Oh! The young man you yearn for must indeed be immovable, who without being shaken can see your matted hair, of the colour of paddy-straw, hanging loosely along your cheeks, bereft for so long of the lotus you liked to place on your ear.

"Which sentient person would not feel sorry, seeing you : all the delicate spots on your skin that used to be covered by jewels are scorched by the sun, and you are so emaciated by ascetic practises that you look like the thin line of the moon crescent appearing during day time.

"I take it that your lover's pride in his good fortune has fooled him, since he has not yet presented himself in front of your eyes, of lovely glances and curved eye-lashes.

"O Gauri, how long will you torment yourself? I too have accumulated some merit in my first stage of life: use half of it and get the husband you desire. In fact, I am extremely eager to know him."

This Brahmin had penetrated the inmost recess of her heart. She could not speak what was in her mind. So she looked with imploring eyes at her companion standing at her side.

This friend then said to the brahmacharin: "O sage, if such is your curiosity, then know who is the one for whom this lady has submitted her body to the fire of asceticism, as one exposes a lotus to the heat of the sun.

"The proud girl, ignoring the most glorious gods seated in the four quarters of the world, including Indra, wants for husband the god who holds in his hand the Pinaka bow,[14] the one who cannot be conquered by mere beauty, as has been shown when he destroyed Madana.

"The story is like this: in his terrible anger Shiva hurled back the arrow aimed at him by the god of love, but although it is Cupid's body that the missile destroyed, it struck a deep blow in her heart.

"From that moment this young girl could not find any peace of mind. Even when she rested in the house of her father, her curly hair smeared with the cooling sandal paste someone had applied on her forehead, lying on a stone carpeted with snow, the love fever kept tormenting her.

"How many times, strolling in the woods with her companions, the Kinnara[15] princesses, she made them cry, when, singing with them the exploits of the great god, she broke down, throat choking with tears.

"She would close her eyes only for a second at the end of the night, and then immediately wake up with a start, 'Where are you going, O Nilakantha, O blue-throated god?' and she would clasp her arms around the neck of an imaginary person.

"She would draw a picture of the god, with the moon-crescent in his hair, and then, the foolish girl, she would reproach him: 'Wise men call you the all-pervasive. How is it that you do not know that this creature loves you?'

"Finally when she realised that there was no other way to win the Lord of the universe, she asked her father for his permission and came with us to this sacred forest for practising austerities.

"The trees she planted, which have been the silent witnesses of her long effort, have now borne fruit; but as for the god whose head is adorned with the moon, her desire does not seem to be even near the beginning of fruition.

"We cannot but cry when we see how much these privations have weakened our friend; this god does not seem to answer prayers. I do not know when he, like Indra releasing the rains on a ploughed and thirsty earth, will favour her."

Thus, knowing the secret of her heart, her companion had revealed Parvati's real sentiments. The handsome brahmacharin, hiding his delight, asked Uma whether this was true or simply a joke.

The daughter of the Mountain took her rosary of crystal beads and let her fingers, pointed upwards like a rose-bud, play with it for a long time while she prepared her answer. Then with great difficulty she uttered these few words:

"O thou who art the best among those who know the

Vedas, thou hast heard the truth. This humble person thou seest is eager to scale the highest peak. And yes, these austerities are the means for achieving that end. Nothing is inaccessible to desire."

Then the ascetic exclaimed: "Maheswara is well-known! Yet you yearn for him! Considering his passion for inauspicious practices I do not feel like approving of your desire.

"You have set your mind on a worthless object! How could this hand of yours, after the nuptial string is tied around it, bear the first clasp of Shiva's hand encircled with snakes?

"Please think of this: on the one side, your bridal robe of silk embroidered with figures of swans, and on the other, an elephant-hide[16] dripping with blood. Can the two go together?

"Could even an enemy of yours consent to be a witness to this scene: your feet, painted with alaktaka dye,[17] leaving red marks on the flower decorations of the marriage pavilion, and then treading upon corpses' hairs scattered all over the cremation-ground?

"What can be more unseemly, tell me, than the chest of the three-eyed god, covered with ashes from the funeral pyre, pressed against your bosom, accustomed to golden sandalwood paste?

"And another humiliation will await you after marriage, when respectable people see you riding an old bull. They will laugh at you, who should have been carried on a royal elephant.

"By its desire to be united with a god who is adorned with garlands of skulls, the bright moon-crescent has already become an object of pity. But so have you, who are as dear to us as the moon-light.

"As regards his body, he has monstrous eyes. In the matter of birth, his parentage is obscure. And as for his wealth, what can be expected from someone who wears only the sky for garment ? O doe-eyed lady, can one find in the three-eyed god anything at all that is normally sought in a husband?

"Turn your mind away from this evil inclination. What is there in common between you, who are full of auspicious marks, and this kind of man? Good people do not worship the gibbet of the cemetery as if it were the sacrificial post of the vedic rites."

Parvati's lower lip trembled with anger. The corners of her eyes reddened. Contracting her graceful brows, she cast a scornful glance at this brahmin who dared say such harsh words.

"You don't know Hara to speak to me in this way. Because petty minds don't understand the motives of great souls, so different from ordinary people, they criticise them.

"People perform auspicious rites with the aim of warding off calamities or attaining prosperity. He is the Protector of the world. He is desireless. What has He to do with those mercantile practices which corrupt the soul?

"Possessing nothing, He is the source of all possessions. He roams in cremation grounds and yet He is the Lord of the three worlds. His appearance is frightening and yet He is called Shiva, the Gentle One. No one truly knows the holder of the Pinaka bow.

"He may be resplendent with jewels or bristling with snakes, he may wear an elephant-hide or a silken robe, he may have a skull or the moon for ornament, but His form no one can define whose body is the universe.

"On touching his body the ashes of the funeral pyre acquire a purifying power. Therefore, when He performs his Great Dance, the dwellers of heaven collect the particles that have fallen from his limbs and apply them on their forehead.

"When Indra riding his formidable elephant comes across this penniless God mounted on an old bull, he alights from his vehicle and bows to him, touching his feet with his forehead and showering them with the red petals of heavenly trees.

"O wrecked soul, although you wish to speak ill of the Lord, you have made one correct statement: He, who is said to be the cause of even the self-existent Brahma, how could his origin be known?

This bas-relief from Angkor in Cambodia is supposed to represent Parvati pluggging her ears in order not to listen to criticism directed at Shiva

"But enough disputed! Let him be what you believe him to be. My heart knows no other feeling than love and is unshakeable. Those whose goal is set do not care for criticism.

"I can see from his quivering lips that this man still wants to speak. Not only is it a sin to say any ill of great souls, but even to listen to such talk is a crime. Ah my friend, please make him go!

"Or else I will leave myself", so saying, the young girl turned her back, and in her movement the bark garment covering her breasts tore a little. At that very moment, assuming his real form, the God of the Bull, with a smile, caught hold of her.

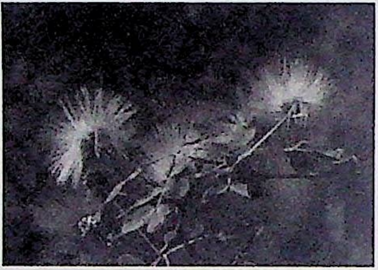
Seeing Him, the daughter of the Mountain-King, all her slender limbs trembling, froze with one foot poised in the air, between movement and immobility, like a great river arrested in its course by a mountain.

"O graceful lady, I have been won by your austerities and from now on I am your slave": as soon as the Lord of the Moon had uttered these words, she forgot the pain of her arduous efforts. For indeed, hardship when rewarded gives birth to renewed vigour.

from: Kalidasa, Kumarasambhava, 5th canto

Glossary

1. **Cupid:** god of Love (or Desire) for the Romans. In Sanskrit this god has many names: Kama (desire), Manobhava (born of the mind), Smara (remembrance), Manmatha (the one who churns the mind), Madana (the one who intoxicates).
2. **The daughter of the Mountain:** Parvati means the daughter of Parvat, i.e. the mountain, Himalaya. Shailaja, another name for Parvati, means also the daughter of the rocs or of the mountain.
3. **Shirisha:** One of the most beautiful Indian flowering trees (latin name: *Albizzia lebbek*). The delicate flowers (also called Sitapushpa) look like miniature powder-puffs. The leaves are sensitive and fold up on being touched.
4. **Tawny:** pale golden brown.
5. **Vermilion:** bright red (here it means a powder of this colour)
6. **Kusha grass:** sacred grass used in ceremonies. Extremely sharp.
7. **Rosary:** a string of beads used for counting prayers or mantras. Rudraksha beads (brown seeds with furrowed surfaces that are the pits of a fruit) are worn by Shaivaite devotees.
8. **Saplings:** young trees
9. **Kartikeya:** the son whom Parvati will get from her union with Shiva (the Kumara of the title). In this particular Sanskrit verse, the name Guha is used. Guha can mean "leader of armies" or "born in a cave".
10. **Chakravaka:** sheldrake or ruddy goose or brahminy duck. These birds are proverbial for the supposed necessary separation at night. They are believed to have been cursed by a sage to spend nights apart.
11. **Anchorites:** ascetics.
12. **Ablutions:** ritual bath.


Shirisha flower

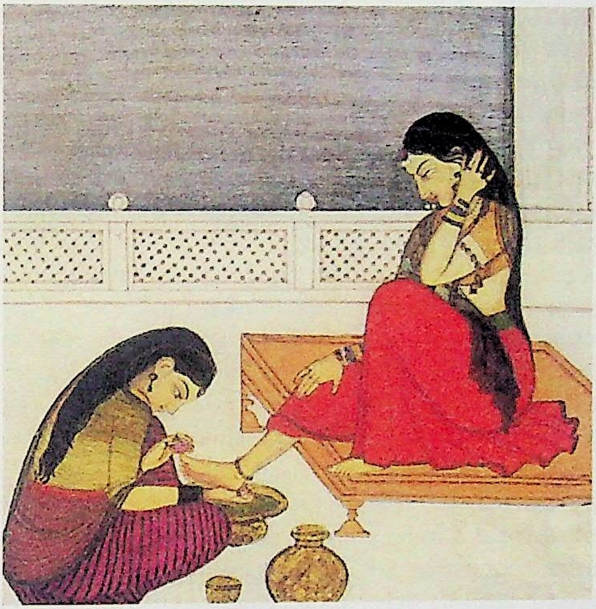
13. The Seven Rishis (*saptarshi*): seven great Rishis of the vedic times: Gotama, Bhardwaja, Vishwamitra, Jamadagni, Vasishtha, Kashapa and Atri. They are sometimes represented by the seven stars of Ursa Major. They are described as bathing in the heavenly Ganges, sitting in its waters, practising Pranayama and other yogic disciplines.

14. Pinaka bow: name of Shiva's bow, made of a rainbow with five heads of Nagas. Pinakin is also a name for Shiva.

15. Kinnara or Kimnara: mythical beings traditionally considered to have the form of a man and the head of a horse. According to some scholars, they are singers and musicians dwelling in the paradise of Kubera on Kailash.

16. Elephant-hide: when Shiva killed Ganasura, the elephant demon, he skinned him and danced in the bloody skin.

17. Alaktaka: in Sanskrit *alaktaka* or *laakshaa*: a resinous substance coming out of the sap of some trees, due to an insect called the lac insect. This red substance is used as a dye. Synonym: shellac.



The dyeing of the feet (Kangra, cir 1785)

Notes

Kalidasa's life

"Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa are the essence of the history of ancient India", said Sri Aurobindo, "if all else were lost, they would still be its sole and sufficient cultural history." Yet, of the life of these three great poets we know very little. And the three plays and four poems of Kalidasa tell us nothing directly about himself. Even Mallinatha, the great commentator of Kalidasa, who lived in the XIVth century AD is silent about his life. As there was more than one author bearing the name of Kalidasa, the facts about one got mixed with that of the others creating confusing myths about his life story.

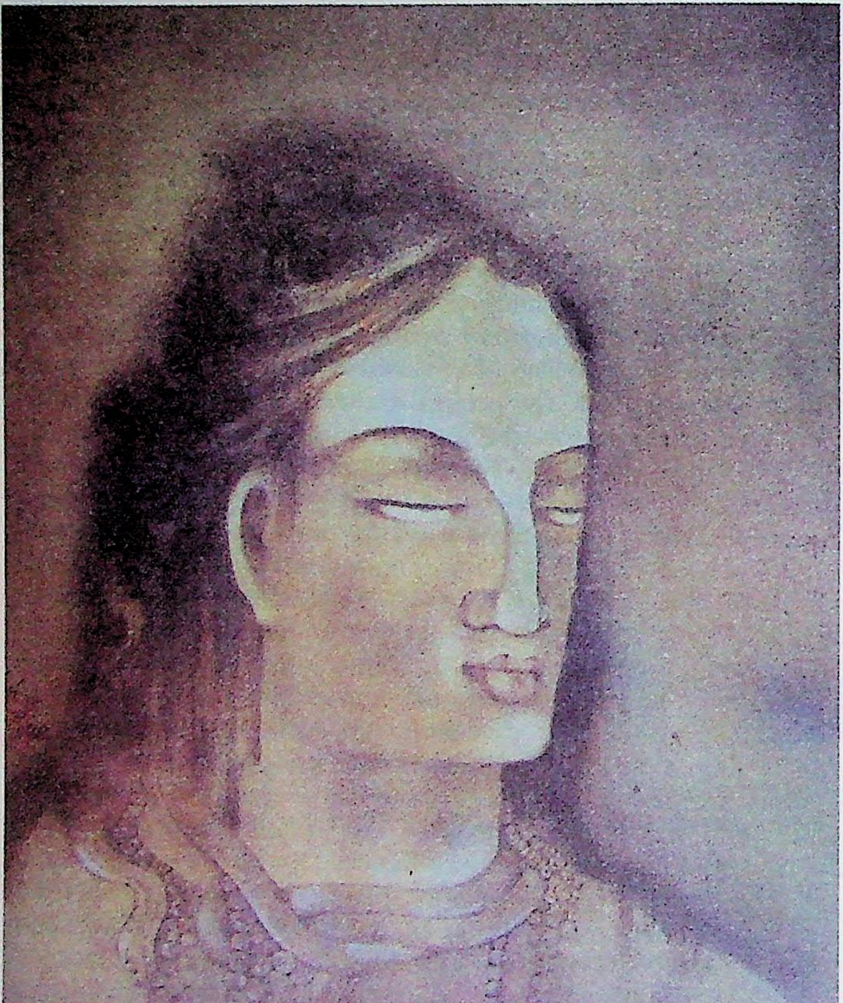
It is generally believed that Kalidasa was a native of Malava (ancient Avanti) and that he lived in its capital Ujjain (in today's Madhya Pradesh). It appears certain that Kalidasa knew Ujjain well and described the beauty of the city including its river, Kshipra. Yet Kalidasa's works show such a wealth of knowledge about the fauna and flora of different regions that many parts of India, including Bihar, Varanasi, Bengal, Kashmir and Vidarbha have laid claim to the honour of being the birth-place of the poet. For instance an author could remark that Kalidasa, being able to describe a flower of saffron, must have lived in Kashmir. Others said that his description of the Ganges prove that he was a native of Bengal, etc.

The date of Kalidasa's birth is also a subject of great debate. The Indian tradition regards Kalidasa as one of the nine *ratnas* (gems) that adorned the King Vikramaditya's court in Ujjain. But various kings in the history of ancient India called themselves by that title, Vikramaditya meaning "Sun of valour". Some scholars identify this Vikramaditya with the King who defeated the Shakas and established the Samvat era in 57 BC in Ujjain. Some others claim that the Vikramaditya in question is Chandragupta II (c. AD 375-414) of the Gupta dynasty. Various other dates have been proposed, so much so that a book like *Kalidasa and His Times* could present no less that five different theories, along with their arguments and counterarguments. In any case, it seems certain that the earliest limit would be the second century BC (as one of Kalidasa's plays Malavikagnimitra mentions some historical events of the Shunga period), and the latest limit would be the seventh century AD (as the name of Kalidasa was found in the Aihole inscription dated AD 634, and also in the Harshacharita of Bana, a court poet of emperor Harsha of Kanauj who reigned from AD 606 to 647). Indian scholarship tends to place Kalidasa earlier in history than Western scholarship.

Around this uncertainty, and probably because of it, a number of anecdotes, fanciful stories and legends have grown. Some belong to the Indian tradition, some to the Tibetan, and some to the Ceylonese tradition. It seems that anecdotes and folklores about Kalidasa began to emanate from the sixteenth century onwards.

According to some accounts, particularly the Tibetan tradition, Kalidasa was born to Brahmin parents and was orphaned soon after his birth. He was brought up by a cowherd and was so dumb that he would sit on the upper end of a branch of a tree and cut the lower part of it with an axe, the perfect example of an idiot. A wicked man, having been refused by the learned Vasanti, daughter of the king of Varanasi, wanted to take his revenge. He managed through some tricks to have her marry the young boy. After a few days, Vasanti discovered that her husband was an idiot and she ordered him out of the house. According to some stories, Kalidasa then undertook a tapasya and prayed to the goddess Kali. That is how he took the name of Kalidasa, the servant of Kali. The goddess was pleased and conferred on him high poetic genius. Then, a transformed man, he came back to the house. The door was closed. Kalidasa called his wife in Sanskrit: *"anaavritakapaatam dwaaram dehi"* ("open the door") His learned wife was surprised to hear him speak in Sanskrit. She asked : *"asti kashchit vaagvisheshah"*, that is to say: "Has some quality come into your speech?" Then Kalidasa is said to have taken the three words uttered by his wife, respectively *asti, kashchit,* and *vaag,* and written three poems, each one starting with one of these words. From *asti* came Kumarasambhava. From *kashchit,* Meghaduta and from *vaag,* Raghuvamsha.

We can find stories about Kalidasa in the tradition of Sri Lanka also. A Ceylonese work Parakramabahucharita which is five hundred years-old speak of Kalidasa's friendship with Kumaradasa, ruler of Ceylon, who was himself a good poet. Kalidasa is said to have lived in Ceylon and to have been murdered there by a courtesan. It



Shiva by Nandalal Bose. Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Arts, Delhi is recounted that when the body of Kalidasa was cremated, the King was so overwhelmed by grief that he leapt into the flames.

An Indian poet, Ballala of the sixteenth century AD also collected anecdotes about Kalidasa in his Bhojaprabandha, the life of king Bhoja, who reigned at Dhara in the Xth century. He speaks of Kalidasa's remarkable skill in rendering poems extempore composing a stanza on the spur of the moment with only a single line given to him.

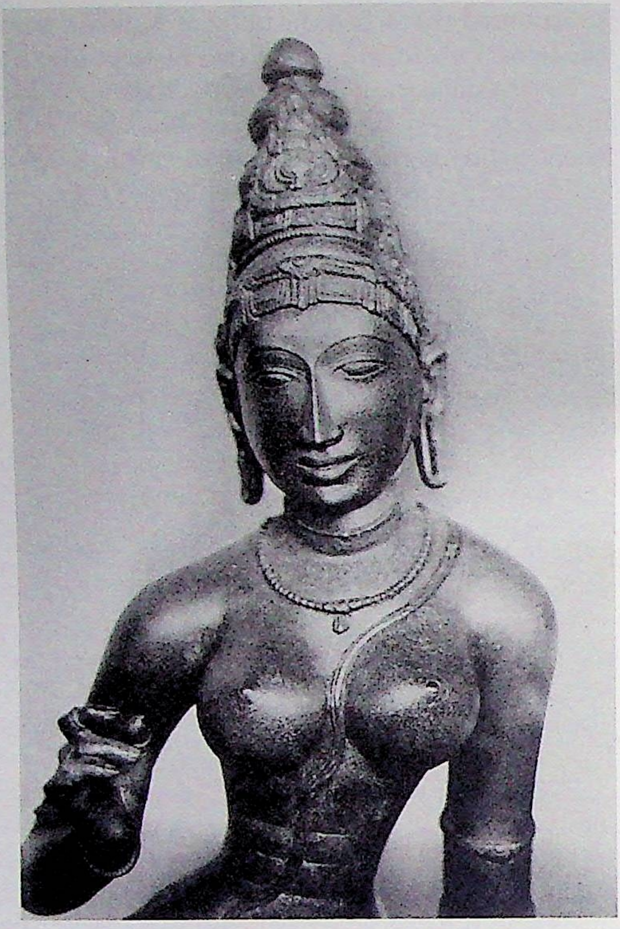
Many anecdotes seem fanciful. But the facts that such legends abound testify to the immense popularity of Kalidasa. "Not only these, while travelling in trains and villages of India we find innumerable stories, very amusing and interesting regarding Kalidasa. All these show that Kalidasa does not live only among the scholars of India and abroad but he is equally one of the most beloved and dearest poets even among those who are not all acquainted with his works or who do not even know how to write and read. And Kalidasa perhaps lives as dearly and as lovingly among them as he does in the minds of the erudite scholars."*

What seems certain at any rate since it comes from a study of Kalidasa's writings themselves is that the extent of his knowledge was prodigious. He knew the Vedas, the Upanishads, the different Shastras, the epics. He must have travelled extensively in Northern India as he described the different kingdoms with their particular customs, manners and products, their geography, their streams and mountains and valleys. He described the trees, flowers, fruits of many regions. He portrayed the beauty of the Himalayas and the Ganges. He gave precise and minute descriptions of all kinds of birds. He possessed a great knowledge of music both vocal and instrumental. He was expert in three ragas of Indian music. He was familiar with the various strata of Indian society. His keen observation surveyed all sorts and conditions of men, princes and peasants, wise and worldly Brahmanas, fishermen and policemen. In fact his knowledge seems so extensive that some authors saw it fit to give him the title of Sarvajna: the all-knowing.**

---

*Kalpika Mukherjee, "Kalidasa in Legends" in *Kalidasa: Afresh*, (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1997), p. 4.

**N. Gangadharan, "Kalidasa as a Sarvajna" in *Kalidasa: Afresh*, (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1997), p. 50.



Parvati.
Bronze,
Tanjavur

Works

Seven works are attributed to Kalidasa. Out of them, three are plays: Malavikagnimitra, Vikramorvashiya, Abhijnanashakuntalam, and four are poems, Ritusamhara (a descriptive poem), Meghaduta (a *khandakavya*) Raghuvamsha, and Kumarasambhava (two *mahakavya* or epic poems). There is no external evidence to ascertain the chronology of Kalidasa's works. However, judged on the base of internal evidence, a few remarks have been made, for instance that Ritusamhara seems to be an early work, and that of the three plays Malavikagnimitra must have been the first and Shakuntala the last.

Period in India's development

It is the work of scholars and historians to debate about the possible date of birth of Kalidasa. However what is important for a layman is not so much to know the precise dates of the poet's life as to understand how to situate Kalidasa in the history of the development of India.

The first period of the ancient history of India is supposed to have extended from an uncertain date up to the birth of Buddha, i.e 550 or 560 BC. It is also called the Vedic age or age of intuition. The Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads correspond to that age.

The second period is the age of Reason. The great epic literature (mainly the Ramayana and Mahabharata), great philosophical systems, codes and ethics, codes of statecraft, as also great sciences and arts, began to develop during this period. Valmiki and Vyasa are the great representatives of that period. Then,

> *Many centuries after these poets, perhaps a thousand years or even more, came the third embodiment of the national consciousness, Kalidasa.... There was everywhere noticeable a petrifying of the national temperament, visible to us in the tendency to codification; philosophy was being codified, morals were being codified, knowledge of any and every sort was being codified; it was on one side of its nature an age of scholars, legislators, dialecticians, philosophical formalisers. On the other side, the creative and aesthetic enthusiasm of the nation was pouring itself into things material, into the life of the senses, into the pride of life and beauty. ... I do not think, indeed, it can be maintained that this period, call it classical or material or what one will, was marked off from its predecessor by any clear division: such a partition would be contrary to the law of human development. Almost all the concrete features of the age may be found as separate facts in ancient India: codes existed from old time; art and drama were of fairly ancient origin, to whatever date we may assign their development; physical Yoga processes existed almost from the first, and the material development portrayed in the Ramayana and Mahabharata is hardly less splendid than that of which the Raghuvamsha is so brilliant a picture.*

But whereas before, these were subordinated to more lofty ideals, now they prevailed and became supreme, occupying the best energies of the race and stamping themselves on its life and consciousness. In obedience to this impulse the centuries between the rise of Buddhism and the advent of Shankaracharya became — though not agnostic and sceptical, for they rejected violently the doctrines of Charvak — yet profoundly scientific and outward-going even in their spiritualism. It was therefore the great age of formalised metaphysics, science, law, art and the sensuous luxury which accompanies the arts.

*Nearer the beginning than the end of this period, when India was systematising her philosophies and developing her arts and sciences, turning from Upanishad to Purana, from the high rarefied peaks of early Vedanta and Sankhya with their inspiring sublimities and bracing keenness to physical methods of ascetic Yoga and the dry intellectualism of metaphysical logic or else to the warm sensuous humanism of emotional religion, before its full tendencies had asserted themselves, in some spheres before it had taken the steps its attitude portended, Kalidasa arose in Ujjayini and gathered up in himself its present tendencies while he foreshadowed many of its future developments.**

---

*Sri Aurobindo, "The Age of Kalidasa", in Centenary Edition, Vol III, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972) p 221-222.

The Birth of Kumara

Although it is believed by most critics that only the first eight cantos are from Kalidasa, the poem contains seventeen cantos and describes the birth of Kumara (also named Karttikeya) and his fight against the asuras. We give here a summary of the last nine cantos, so that the reader gets a glimpse of the totality of the story.

Canto 9: While Shiva was savouring the pleasures of love, a pigeon who was no other than Agni entered the chamber and sought on behalf of Indra and the gods a commander to lead the godly hosts against the demon Taraka. Shiva deposited his semen in Fire.

Canto 10. Then Agni bearing Shiva's semen approached Indra and was advised to cast it in the Ganges, who would receive it. The seed of Shiva passed from Agni to the Ganges, and it emerged pure from her. The Krittikas (the stars of the Pleiades) went to the Ganges for bathing and received the semen. The Krittikas, unable to bear it, cast it in a forest of reeds and from it was born, with immeasurable splendour, a child with six mouths.

Canto 11. There was a great dispute between the Ganges, the Krittikas and Agni as to who would take the divine child. Shiva and Parvati came to that place and Parvati was told by Shiva that it was her own son. Parvati then took hold of the child. The child attained on his sixth day fresh youth and talents and he became a master of all weapons.

Canto 12. Indra came with all the gods to Shiva's palace. Shiva appointed his son to the command of the divine armies. Kumara accepted the command of his father and Indra was overjoyed.

Canto 13. Kumara followed by the gods, traversed the path of stars and reached heaven. Kashyapa and the mother of the gods blessed him and the gods and Kumara marched forth to fight against Taraka.

Canto 14. The army marched on and rent the skies with their war-cries.

Canto 15. The great demons trembled with fear. Evil portents appeared before them. But they marched forth.

Canto 16. A great battle was fought in which the two armies clashed violently together. Taraka advanced to Indra and the other gods to fight against them.

Canto 17. Kumara killed Taraka, chopping off his head. Indra and the gods praised the might of their leader.

Kumarasambhava and the Puranas

The legend is an ancient one in Hindu mythology. The story of the conception of Kumara is found in the two epics (Ramayana, Balakanda, chap. 36-37 and Mahabharata, Vanaparva, chap 223-231). The marriage of Shiva and Parvati is related in a few Puranas, particularly in the Brahma-Purana, the Skanda-Purana and in the Shiva-Purana. The version in the Shiva-Purana is quite detailed: its Parvati-khanda starts with the marriage of Himavan and ends with Shiva and Parvati's marriage. However it is not certain that Kalidasa borrowed from the Puranas. It is more likely that the Shiva-Purana was the borrower. As to Kalidasa's specific sources they are unknown.

As the reader might be interested to have a taste of the narration in the Puranas, we present here a short extract of Shiva-Purana describing Parvati's tapasya.

29. Discarding all the fine clothes of her taste, she wore tree-barks and the fine girdle of Munja grass.

30. She eschewed necklace and wore the pure deer skin. She arrived at Gangavatarana* for performing penance.**

31. The Gangavatarana was in the Himalayan ridge where Kama was burnt by Siva who was performing meditation.

32. Oh dear, that Himalayan ridge devoid of Siva was painfully seen by Parvati, the mother of the universe, the daughter of the mountain.

33. She stood for a while in the place where formerly Siva had performed penance and became dispirited by the pangs of separation.

34. Crying aloud "Alas O Siva", she, the daughter of the moun-

---

* It is a sacred place celebrated in the Matsya and Vayu Puranas where the river Ganga emerges from the Bindu Sarovara through visible outlets and subterranean channels.

** The reader will note with dismay that fifty years after independence, when Indian scholarship should have abandoned the misconceptions of Western critics, the word *tapasya* is still translated by "penance".

tain, lamented sorrowfully and anxiously.

35. Suppressing the delusion with fortitude after a long time Parvati, the daughter of Himavat, got herself initiated for the observance of ritualistic activities.

36. She performed penance in the excellent holy centre Srngitirtha which (later) acquired the title "Gauri-Sikhara" due to her performance of penance thereon.

37. O sage, many beautiful holy plants were laid there by Parvati for testing the fruitfulness of her penance.

38. Neatly cleaning the ground, the beautiful lady built the altar. Then the penance, difficult to be performed even by the sages, was begun.

39. Suppressing her sense-organs with her mind, she started the great penance in a place within the proximity.

40. In the summer she kept a perpetually blazing fire all round and remaining within continued muttering the mantra.

41. In the rainy season she continuously remained sitting on the bare ground on the rock and got herself drenched by the downpour of rain.

42. During the winter, with great devotion she remained in water throughout. During snowfall and in the nights too she performed her penance observing fast.

43. Performing such austerities and engrossed in the muttering of the five-syllabled mantra, Parvati meditated on Siva, the bestower of fruits of our cherished desires.

44. Everyday during leisure time she used to water the trees planted by her along with her maids and extended acts of hospitality.

45. Chill gusts of wind, cool showers, and unbearable heat she bore with equanimity.

46. Different sorts of worries she did not mind at all. O sage, fixing her mind in Siva alone she remained firm and steady.

47. The first year she spent in taking fruits, the second in taking leaves, in the course of her penance. She spent many years thus.

48. Then Shivâ, the daughter of Himavat, eschewed even the leaves. She did not take any food. She was engrossed in the performance of penance.

49. Since she, the daughter of Himavat, eschewed leaves from her diet, she was called Aparna by the gods.

50. Then Parvati performed great penance standing on one leg

and remembering Siva, she continued muttering the five-syllabled mantra.

51. Clad in barks of trees, wearing matted hair and eager in the meditation of Siva, she surpassed even sages by her penance.

52. Parvati thus spent three thousand years in the penance-grove performing penance and meditating on lord Siva.

53. Remaining for a short while in the place where Siva had performed penance for sixty thousand years, Parvati thought like this:

54. Does not the Supreme lord know me observing these ritualistic activities now? Wherefore am I not followed by him though engaged in penance?

55. In the Sastras and the Vedas, lord Siva is always sung in praise by the sages as the bestower of welfare, omniscient, all-pervading and all-seer.

56. The lord is the bestower of all riches, the moulder of fine emotions, the bestower of the desires of devotees and the remover of their distress.

57. If I am devoted to the bull-bannered lord, discarding all desires, may He be pleased with me.

58. If the mantra of the Narada Tantra, consisting of five syllables has been continuously repeated by me with great devotion may He be pleased with me.

59. If I am a devotee without aberrations of Siva, the lord of all, may He be extremely pleased with me.

60. Pondering frequently like this incessantly, she performed penance for a long time, with her face turned downwards, her apparel of bark and mind without aberrations.

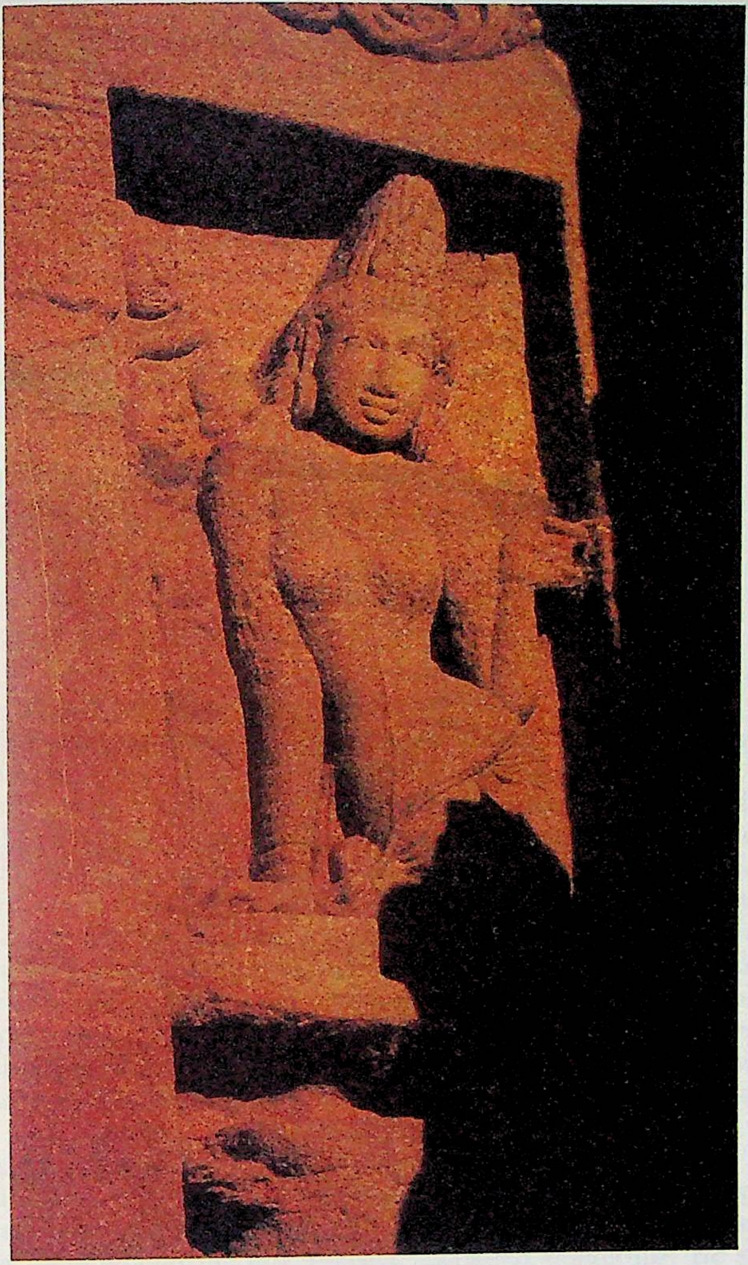
61. She performed penance difficult to be performed even by the sages, so much so that people were struck with surprise.

62. All of them came there to witness her penance. Considering themselves blessed, they proclaimed thus approvingly.

63. "To follow the standard of the virtuous personages is declared to be conducive to greatness. There is no delimitation in penance. Virtue shall be honoured by the wise always.

64. "After seeing or hearing about the penance of this lady what penance will be pursued by a man? A penance greater than this has never been before, nor will it ever be."

65. Saying thus, they praised the penance of Parvati and joyously returned to their abodes. Even persons of sturdy countenance praised her penance.



Parvati - Kanchipuram, Kailashnath temple (photo: O. Barot)

66. O sage, listen to another surprising influence of the penance of Parvati, the mother of the universe.

67. Even the inimical beings in and around her hermitage became free from animosity due to her power.

68. Lions and cows prone to the passions of love, hatred, etc., ceased to harass one another, thanks to her greatness.

69. O excellent sage, creatures like cats, mice, etc., who are born enemies to one another did not exhibit any bad characteristics there.

70. O excellent sage, trees bore fruits, grasses grew in plenty and flowers of variegated nature and colour blossomed there.

71. The entire forest became comparable to Kailasa as it were the achievement of her penance.

Taken from: *The Siva-Purana translated by a board of scholars,*
Part II, Rudreshvara Samhita, Parvatikhanda,
chapter 22, verse 29-71,
(Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1997), p. 556-559.

Translations

"Scholarly translations of Kalidasa into English have generally been of poor literary quality": such is the opinion of H. Heifetz who himself translated Kumarasambhava. Heifetz's main concern was to underline the correspondence between emotion and rhythm. How could a translator render the emotional content of the different rhythms used by the poet? For no less that eight different meters are used in the Kumarasambhava, and each canto is composed in a specific meter, with a change in the final stanza or last two stanzas. As Heifetz says, "The best Sanskrit poetry links the emotional possibilities of each fixed meter with a great range of meaning and sound to produce effects matched in the West perhaps only by the great Latin poets." Obviously a great challenge for the translator is to recreate, if at all possible, some of these effects in another language.

Another difficulty lies in translating words which have no equivalent in English or which, even when translatable, do not at all convey the same association to a person not familiar with Sanskrit. As Sri Aurobindo remarks, "The life and surroundings in which Indian poetry moves cannot be rendered in the terms of English poetry". A literal translation would be abstruse and bad poetry. And

Sri Aurobindo adds, "the business of poetical translation is to reproduce not the exact words, but the exact image, associations and poetical beauty and flavour of the original."

As an example, we reproduce here the first four stanzas of Kumarasambhava. This is but a short extract of the first canto, which opens on a description of Himalaya, seen at the same time as a god, as a mountain and as a living being. The reader will find side by side the Sanskrit text and two different renderings by Sri Aurobindo.

अस्त्युत्तरस्यां दिशि देवतात्मा हिमालयो नाम नगाधिराजः ।
पूर्वापरौ तोयनिधि वगाह्य स्थितः पृथिव्या इव मानदण्डः ।।**1**।।

यं सर्वशैलाः परिकल्प्य वत्सं मेरौ स्थिते दोग्धरि दोहदक्षे ।
भास्वन्ति रत्नानि महौषधीश्च पृथूपदिष्टां दुदुहुर्धरित्रीम् ।।**2**।।

अनन्तरत्नप्रभवस्य यस्य हिमं न सौभाग्यविलोपि जातम् ।
एको हि दोषो गुणसंनिपाते निमज्जतीन्दोः किरणेष्वङ्कः ।।**3**।।

यश्चाप्सरोविभ्रममण्डनानां संपादयित्रीं शिखरैर्विभति ।
वलाहंकच्छेदविभक्तराहामकालसंध्यामिव धातुमत्ताम् ।।**4**।।

First rendering by Sri Aurobindo:

1
A God mid hills northern Himaloy rears
His snow-piled summits' dizzy majesties
And in the eastern and the western seas
He bathes his giant sides; lain down appears
Measures the dreaming earth in an enormous ease.

2
Him, it is told, the living mountains made
A mighty calf of earth, the mother large,
When Meru of that milking had the charge
By Prithu bid, and jewels brilliant-rayed
Were brightly born and herbs on every mountain marge.

3

So is he in his infinite riches dressed
Not all his snows can slay that opulence.
As drowned in luminous floods the mark though dense
On the moon's argent disc; so faints oppressed
One fault mid crowding virtues fading from our sense.

4

Brightness of minerals on his peaks outspread
In their love-sports and in their dances gives
To heavenly nymphs adornment, which when drive
The split clouds across, those broken hues displayed
Like an untimely sunset's magic glories live.

Another rendering of the same passage by Sri Aurobindo:

A god concealed in mountain majesty,
Embodied to our cloudy physical sight
In snowy summits and green-gloried slopes,
To northward of the many-rivered land,
Measuring the earth in an enormous ease,
Immense Himaloy dwells and in the moan
Of eastern ocean and in western floods
Plunges his giant sides. Him once the hills
Imagined as the mighty calf of Earth
When the wideness milked her udders; gems brilliant-rayed
Were born and herbs on every mountain marge.
So in his infinite riches is he dressed,
Not all his snows can slay his opulence,
And though they chill the feet of heaven, her sons
Forget that fault mid all his crowding gifts,
As faints in luminous floods the gloomy mark
On the moon's argent disc; they choose his vales
For playground, his hill-peaks for divine homes.
Brightness of minerals on his rocks is spread
Which to the Apsaras give adorning hues
In their love-sports and in their dances; flung
On the split clouds in their brilliant colours ranged,
Like an untimely sunset's glories live.

Bibliography

1) on Kumarasambhava

— Sri Aurobindo. *Kalidasa, The Birth of the War-God*, three renderings. Centenary Edition, vol. VIII, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972.

— Sri Aurobindo. *Notes on the Kumarasambhavam*. Centenary Edition, Vol III, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972.

— Heifetz, Hank. *The Origin of the Young God,* Kalidasa's Kumarasambhava, Translated with Annotation and an Introduction. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990.

— Kalidasa. *Kâlidâsa's Kumârasambhava,* Cantos I-VIII. Edited with the commentary of Mallinâtha, a Literal English Translation, Notes and Introduction by M.R. Kale. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1981.

— Kalidasa. *Kumârasambhavam of Kalidasa,* Fifth Canto. Text and English Translation, Edited by Dr Rabindra Kumar Panda, with Introduction, Text, English and Hindi translations and Notes. Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 1999.

— Suryakanta. *Kalidasa's vision of Kumarasambhava.* New Delhi: Meharchand Lachhmandas Publications, 1963.

2) on Kalidasa and his other works

— Aggarwal, Vinod. *The Imagery of Kalidasa*. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1985.

— Sri Aurobindo. *Kalidasa*. Centenary Edition, Vol III, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972.

— Sri Aurobindo. *The Foundations of Indian Culture.* Centenary Edition, Vol. XIV, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972.

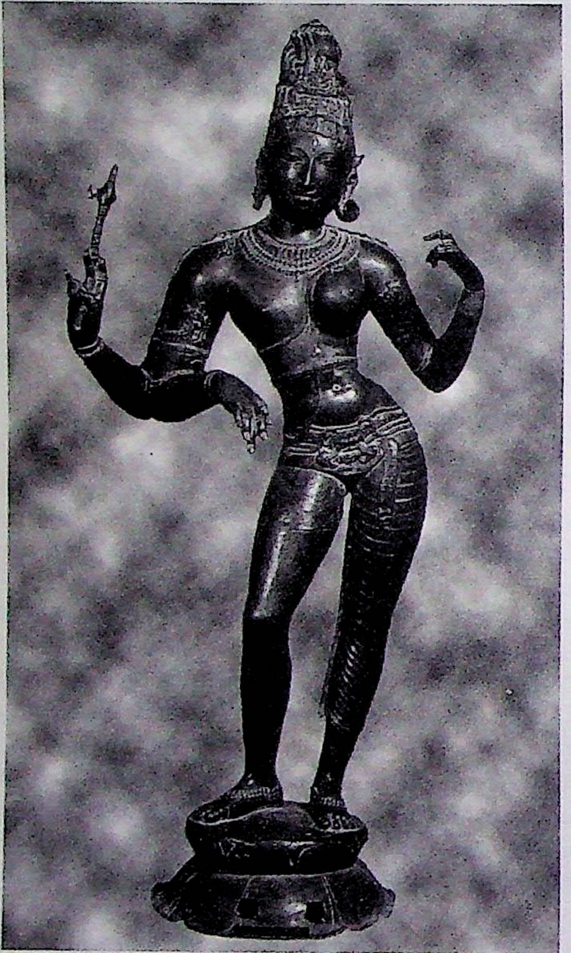
— Bhatt, H.D. "Shailesh". *The Story of Kalidas*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt of India, 1992.

— Devadhar, C.R. *Works of Kalidasa.* Edited by with an exhaustive Introduction, Translation and Critical and Explanatory Notes (Two volumes). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986.

— Jain, K.C. *Kalidasa and his Times*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1990.

— Kalidasa. *Kalidasa, The Loom of Time,* Translated from Sanskrit

and Prakrit with an Introduction by Chandra Rajan. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989.
—Kalidasa. *The Plays of Kalidasa, Theater of Memory,* Edited by Barbara Stoler Miller. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1999.
— Krishnamoorthy, K. *Kalidasa.* New Delhi: Sahitya Academi, 1994.
— कालिदास ग्रन्थावली, अनुवादक एवं संपादक श्री रामप्रताप त्रिपाठी, किताब महल
— *Kalidasa: Afresh* (Prof. S.N. Rath Felicitation Volume) Nag Publisher, Delhi 1997.



Shiva and Parvati
in one body:
Ardhanarishwara

To awaken Shiva from his trance, all the beauty of this world took the form of a woman. Parvati is Nature, Prakriti, and from her union with the Eternal Purusha, a being is to be born who will defeat evil. Parvati is the soul of us all, human beings searching for God. She is destined to meet Him and unite with Him. Yet, for attaining Him, whom Kama's weapon cannot touch, in a fierce effort she has herself to become the bow, stretched to the extreme, and the arrow, solely pointed at Him. Although She is the great goddess, in order to take her right place on Shiva's lap She has to give up entirely what She was. What a paradox that for conquering the supreme Soul the divine Mother must throw herself into the fire of sacrifice! Even for Her, there is a price to pay, as it were. It is why this story has been called a "supreme fable": it reveals a great secret of human life and demonstrates the nature of action.

The present monograph presents an episode of the life of the goddess as recounted by Kalidasa in his epic Kumarasambhava. The poet describes one of the greatest instruments used by ancient Indian seekers in their quest, the method of tapasya, here undertaken by Parvati herself for the sake of love. Tapasya can be said to include three stages. Firstly, one clearly sees and comprehends that a sacrifice is necessary to achieve one's object. Secondly, one determines to give oneself in sacrifice: integral self-giving, concentration of the will, and gathering of all the different parts of the being around one's purpose are included in this stage. When this is achieved, the desired object is finally attained and the tapaswin or tapaswini experiences a feeling of renewed energy, inner fulfilment and harmony. He or she plunges into great depths of joy and ecstasy. This monograph is aimed at presenting this key-element in ancient Indian culture, and how it could be seen and described through the eyes of a great artist.

Rs 120

ISBN 81-85636-87-7